

Infiltrated

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Summary: "Do you want to talk about it?" / "No." His tone of voice would have intimidated any other person, but Cortana was, as she liked to remind him, not like anyone else he'd ever met. Set between Halo: CE and Halo 2.

Infiltrated

****Author's Notes: Takes place between Halo: CE and Halo 2. That's right, we're going old school folks.****

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><p>John's luck had finally run out.<p>

He fired the last of his shotgun shells at the approaching Flood before switching to his less-effective pistol. He jammed his last clip into the magnum as he attempted to backtrack to the front of the control tower. His eyes tracked the movement of the the Flood that surrounded them.

He was outnumbered and running out of bullets faster than he would have liked.

"Options?"

"You mean besides becoming a tasty snack?" retorted Cortana.

He didn't respond as he turned a corner and started running from a new wave of Flood that were headed to their position. He scanned the ground for any other weapons that he could use, but found nothing.

"Here." A marker appeared on his HUD. "Get me into the system and I'll be able to override the security locks. We can barricade ourselves in a utility room until the cavalry arrives. It's not the most heroic plan, but it should work."

Heroism wasn't an option, not when he had less than three dozen bullets on him. "Understood."

He turned a corner and was face to face with another infected Elite. Without thinking, he swung up and slammed the Flood in the jaw with his gauntlet. As the former Elite staggered backwards, John fired a shot into his skull.

"Nice shot, Tex," Cortana muttered. Louder, she said, "I've contacted Johnson. He and a group of Marines are headed to our position. Expected arrival time: ten minutes."

Ten minutes. They could survive that long if he could get Cortana into the systems.

John raced down the corridor to where a set of double doors were. His chest heaved as he reached around, removed Cortana's chip from his helmet and placed it inside the terminal. Seconds later, her avatar appeared.

"Give me a second to override." A look of concentration passed over her face.

From behind them, John could hear dozens of Flood coming for them. He raised his gun, ready to do what he could to give Cortana enough time to hack into the systems.

Seconds later, the crawling parasites appeared from around the corner.

"Cortana?" he asked, not taking his eyes off the incoming hostiles.

"I need another ninety second seconds."

He was going to run out of ammo before then; he needed to find another weapon. Another infected Elite rounded the corner, plasma pistol in hand.

Perfect.

John charged towards the Flood, ignoring the infection form as they jumped on him. His shield levels dropped dangerously low as he approached the infected Elite. Before it could attack, John fired a half dozen bullets in its skull.

As it slumped forward, John reached out and pilfered the plasma rifle. He shot at the hoard of infection forms that surrounded him. Down the hall, Cortana looked at him.

"Got it." A smile passed over her lips. "Yank me, Chief."

Before he could do as she requested, a group of the infection bustled through. To his surprise, it ignored him and approached the plinth where Cortana's chip was.

"I know I look human, but-" Suddenly, a look of horror passed over her face. "Chief?" Her voice was tinged with horrific shock.

He ran to her position, firing the plasma pistol at the Flood, careful not to hit the plinth.

"Chief!" she cried. He watched as she fell to her knees as one of the infection forms slipped a tentacle into the reader where Cortana's chip was.

He fired another burst of plasma at the parasite, careful not to hit Cortana's chip. The parasite exploded, but its tentacle remained lodged in the slot.

"John, help me please!" she screamed.

He was almost there. Only several meters separated them, but before he could reach out and pluck her to safety, her avatar started morphing into a hideous shape.

She had been infected.

"You couldn't save me," she declared in a voice that was as wretched as the form she had taken. "And now, you will die."

John shot up from his bed, his chest heaving. It had all been inside his mind. He -and Cortana- were on the Cairo Station, safe from any Flood that might have survived the destruction of the Halo ring.

He scrubbed his face with his hands, shoving the disconcerting dream from his mind.

Moments later, a familiar figure appeared from the holotank next to his bed. Cortana's concern was carefully hidden behind her face of neutrality, but it seeped into her voice. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." His tone of voice would have intimidated any other person, but Cortana was, as she liked to remind him, not like anyone else he'd ever met.

Instead of shirking away in fear, she straightened her stance from the holotank and crossed her arms. "Spill it."

Images of her avatar being consumed by the Flood cascaded over him. He resisted the urge to turn on the lights in his quarters in attempt to cleanse his mind from the dream. "Can the Flood ingest inorganic material?" he asked.

Her eyebrows turned down for a fraction of a second. His question caught the unflappable AI off-guard. "Unlikely. Guilty Spark didn't seem too concerned with the infestation on the Autumn. Although I suppose..." She stopped in mid-sentence as realization dawned on her. "...I didn't know you worried so much about me, Chief."

John grimaced. He should have listened to his first instinct and kept his mouth shut. "It was just a dream."

Her demeanor softened. "More like a nightmare," she said quietly. Her arms fell to her sides. "I think about them too." Several seconds passed. "The others."

Now, more than before, John wished there was a mission for him to

accomplish. Being stationed on the Cairo platform left too much time for him to think about those he had been unable to protect.

"But, we beat the Flood. The Halo ring was destroyed," Cortana continued. "We saved humanity from the threat."

John disagreed. He couldn't shake the feeling that there were more out there. The Forerunners wouldn't have built such a weapon as the Halo ring if the Flood were so easily defeated. "The Flood could be in other Forerunner installations."

She raised an eyebrow. "After everything we've learned about them, it wouldn't surprise me, but..." She took a step forward, to the edge of the holotank. "...even if the Flood could ingest AIs, I'm not worried."

Her confidence almost cut through the lingering concern John felt, but he couldn't dismiss the thought of her being turned into some kind of Flood abomination. "But you were created using human DNA," he argued.

Cortana nodded. "This is true," she said, getting a faraway look. John wondered if she was accessing the data she collected in the Halo ring to see if his concerns were warranted.

Finally, she looked back at John. "I'll be fine."

She didn't sound quite as sure of herself as she had before. Was she hiding something from him? "How do you know?" he pressed.

She shrugged. "I have you, don't I?"

A long silence stretched in front of them as he considered her question.

No matter what missions lied ahead for them, it was his job to take care of her. And he would.

He nodded. "Yes, you do."

A soft smile passed over her lips. "You should get some sleep. Rumor has it you're getting some kind of award tomorrow," she said playfully.

Even more important to the Spartan, John would finally be getting his new armor and he wouldn't have to walk around in his standard issue uniform. "Will you be at the ceremony?"

She looked surprised. "Where else would I be? I know how much you love attention from the press." She smirked. "Don't worry, Chief, I'll be there to provide emotional support."

"Thanks," he said dryly. He lay on the too-small bed. The glow of Cortana washed over him.

They remained there in silence. Eventually, he felt his eyelids start to close as the lure of sleep called to him. He would never admit it out loud, but Cortana's presence offered him a bit of comfort.

As he was drifting to sleep, he swore he heard Cortana whisper, "And,

John? You'll always have me too."

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file.